

Chapter 1

Rainforest, Waimanu, HI | Sunday 1703 HST

The girl pounded down the forest path into deepening darkness. The bottom of the cloud ahead had lowered almost to ground level. She sensed its moisture condense, its droplets form and gather and grow heavier. Rain would slicken the trail, slow her down. The storm was coming on so fast it seemed unnatural.

Did he make it happen? How?

She ranged her perception outward and back, seeking the dark thing in pursuit, reflexively calculating distance and direction, interpolating an intercept point.

He's gaining!

She picked up the pace, running flat out, heedless of the uneven ground. Her feet picked out solid footing with the instinct of a mountain goat, but her mind made another reflexive calculation as lungs and heart edged into the anaerobic zone.

I can't keep this up. He's too damn fast.

The cloud bottom ruptured then and the rain came, torrents so heavy they hammered through the triple canopy as if it were tissue paper. The mental radar that let her detect him went chaotic, the signal degraded into random noise by the rain. But that would work both ways.

Now he can't sense me either.

The girl skidded on a wet stone and slammed against a tree, ripping her shirt on the rough bark, scraping skin off her shoulder. She swore. Then she smiled, a hard grimace. She danced further off the trail.

Yes! A little fork... maybe... if he'll just buy it...

She ripped a second piece of sleeve, broke a branch and snagged the cloth on it. Then she clambered back toward the trail, stepping on rocks and tree roots to avoid leaving footprints. She edged carefully down the side of the trail, wet feet in the streams of water that would erase signs of her passage, then took flight again. The rain came down harder. Sudden torrential downpours were common enough on this part of the island, but this one? *Just too incredible.*

Lightning flashed. The compression wave followed instantly, slamming branches and debris into her back, knocking her down. She rolled as she hit the mud, then flipped upright and staggered onward. Her cheek was numb and she spat blood.

Did he cause the lightning? Could he have that kind of power? Here, of all places? How?

Fruitless questions now. The cards had been dealt, the dice rolled.

Too much power!

Fear began to build on that possibility.

And I'm totally turned around! How can I be lost in my own forest?

The fear rushed toward panic. She forced it down by reaching out to feel the forest with her whole being. The interconnectedness flowed through her, and its unity triggered the adaptive commands from her mind to her body. Glands reacted and neurochemicals flowed into her brain's blood, a complex orchestrated balance of pain suppressants and stimulants.

Adrenaline-laced strength flooded back into her wobbly legs. She resumed running down the trail, feet again anticipating each unevenness and adjusting instinctively. Her mind became clear, filled with the confidence that she was truly a creature of this forest: adaptable, resourceful, agile, powerful. A calmness returned.

The rain stopped abruptly as she ran out of its shaft into sunlight and onto a dry trail. The joy and calm proved fleeting, though; with the rain behind she sensed her pursuer once more. The distance between them had been halved, he was following her like a homing missile.

How can he do that? Through that downpour!

Panic flared again and she almost tripped.

Think! Make a trap? No, that would take too much time; he hadn't bought into the decoyed path, so he'd be on her before she could fashion anything damaging.

Sisters, help me!

Images of white-robed women flashed across part of her consciousness as she ran. *Face your fear, child, stern voices invoked, stop running. Turn and fight.*

Thunder roared behind her, as if the storm would spin on its heels and clutch her back. She ran toward the setting sun. A familiar tree flashed by, and suddenly she was no longer lost: the trail dead-ended not far ahead on a volcanic headland overlooking the bay.

I will face my fear. But on my battleground, not his.

Seconds later, without no hesitance in her headlong pace, young Eva Connard hurled herself off the cliff and arrowed down toward the sun-speckled waves of Waimanu Bay a thousand feet below. A vortex formed in the bay as she plunged toward it and spun a waterspout upward to greet her.

Merauke, Irian Jaya | Monday 1303 JYT

His gaunt face in the mirror stared back at him, a sight he hadn't seen in seven long years. Slowly, he realized his time as a captive had enhanced his appeal rather than diminished it. He smiled.

The lines are deeper. The hair is shot with gray. Yes, that will do nicely. I look like a prophet, truly.

A man entered the washroom behind him, froze, and stared into the mirror.

"Mahdi!" the man gasped. He went down on one knee, head bowed.

"Yes," Muhammad Zurvan answered. He ran an admiring finger down the harshly handsome plane of his cheek, but suppressed his elation. *I must appear humble.* Zurvan turned away from the mirror and rearranged his expression, feeling the old skills return quickly.

"We thought you were dead," the man glanced up, a sidelong frightened look, then lowered his eyes again. "Seven years, Mahdi..." he murmured.

Zurvan studied the man. *The myth is being re-born. I must choose my words carefully. My actions as well.* He spoke softly, almost in a whisper.

"Long years. I have wandered the wilderness. I have returned."

"Praise Allah!" The man quivered, gave another sidelong glance.

"I sought enlightenment."

"Mahdi!"

"I have spoken with the Prophet."

The man dropped his other knee, prostrating himself in the prayer position, gasping. Zurvan smiled at the top of the man's turbaned head. *I have him now.*

"I have met the Christ."

The man moaned.

"He is with us. He will pray with us, with the Mahdi. Say it now."

The man began to sob, reciting the proper prayer. Zurvan stroked his beard, listening acutely, parsing the complex intonations. *Good. After seven years they remember the code, and the al-Mahama al-Kubra. Their discipline remains intact.* He arranged his expression carefully, erasing elation from it, making it thoughtful, humble, caring. Then he spoke.

“I have wrestled with Shaitan, in the wilderness.”

The man jerked back up on his knees, shocked, and stared at him.

“By Allah’s grace, I overcame him.”

“Praise Allah!” The man pulled off his belt and began to whip his back. He wept with joy, working himself into ecstasy. Zurvan watched for a bit, keeping his expression fixed.

Not too bright. But faithful; he stayed in place for seven years. He retained the code and came when I called.

Zurvan grabbed the man’s flailing hand. “Peace, my son. What is your name?”

“Ahmed, Mahdi.”

“Ahmed. Yes, I remember now. You were only a boy when I entered the wilderness. You are a man now. And you remembered the code.”

“I am your servant! As before and as always.”

Zurvan reached out to grasp the man’s shoulder. *If you can get me off this island you are. If not, I’ll kill you.* He smiled at the thought. *Seven years a prisoner of those wretched little creatures. I’m overdue for some killing.*

“Good. Ahmed, there must be no word of my return. Not a hint.”

Ahmed’s eyes widened, disappointment clear on his face.

“I overcame Shaitan once, Ahmed, but the devil is strong. He has his infidel armies in the West. The infidels have ears and eyes, all over the world, especially here.”

Ahmed straightened, puffing out his chest proudly. “Islam will conquer all, Mahdi! It is foretold! The end time!”

“Yes, Ahmed. And that time is nearly on us. But Shaitan is clever, so we must be too. Clever and quiet, and building our strength unheard and unseen until we are ready. Do you understand?”

Ahmed nodded, silent, but Zurvan read the expressions fleeting over the man’s face. *You crave to announce it, the great war. So stupid. Do I kill you now, Ahmed?*

“You must hold your joy close to your heart, Ahmed. No word of my return.”

The man nodded.

“Not until the time has arrived.”

“The faithful, Mahdi... your *Jaesh*...”

“Of course, my friend. A few must know. But cell rules apply. And first you must get me off this island, to a safe place beyond the reach of the Indonesian government. It collaborates with the infidel.”

Ahmed stroked his beard. “There is a place... East Timor, in the highlands, a Muslim retreat. You will be safe, and welcomed.”

One of my old ones, in the safety net. Yes! Zurvan kept his expression bland. *They were well isolated, but... seven years? Are they compromised now?*

“The United Nations? Australian peacekeepers?”

“Not in the highlands, Mahdi.”

And that country is no friend to the Indonesian government.

“Good. Then arrange it, Ahmed. Quickly! And when you return, bring me clothing. And scissors.”

Waimanu Bay, HI | Sunday 1704HST

Eva sucked in air as she fell, driving it into her lungs, commanding them to supersaturate her blood with oxygen. The waterspout caught her gently, cradling her body exactly as she'd intended, bleeding off her momentum as they fell together toward the water surface. Her mind's radar briefly sensed her dark pursuer launch from the cliff top, then the water closed over and she lost contact.

She smiled grimly. *He can't possibly match my skill. He'll have a much harder landing. And then we'll see...*

As she dropped through the water she framed a second intention, a safety valve: *Attend me, my friends! I may need your help.* She sensed their response, an instantaneous alertness as they forsook their game, turned as one and sped toward her from the deeper waters offshore.

How far out? She couldn't tell. *But they're coming if I need them. Good!*

Eva flipped and landed on the bay bottom, her feet kicking up coarse black volcanic sand mixed with organic sediment. Fish flashed away, startled. The water was not as clear as it sometimes was, but neither was it murky. *No advantage either way,* she decided, but edged into

the partial concealment of a rock outcrop anyway. A reflexive twist of her mind automatically adjusted local gravity enough to counter buoyancy as she anchored herself to the rock. *Let him come to me; let him use up his oxygen and energy.*

Almost on cue, a pressure wave told her he'd hit the water surface ten meters above. She smiled. *Ouch! That must've hurt.*

And then there the thing was, a formless shadow, almost invisible except for the distortion it caused in the water and the flickering around its edges. It twisted as it sank down.

Eva pulled a null field over herself and watched her own body fade into just a hint of waviness in the water. She became a wraith against the rock and sand. *Find me if you can.* Then she slowed her racing pulse, reducing oxygen consumption. *Let's see who runs out of air first, bozo.*

The amorphous nothingness fell through the water and splashed up a wave of sand and sediment as it smacked into the bottom twenty meters away. *Ouch, that hurt, too, I bet. Or...*

It was, in theory, possible to extend a gravitational wave well outward from the body. A higher skill level than she'd yet achieved, but... maybe not beyond that of her pursuer. The possibilities flashed across her mind and converged: drive a gravity wedge ahead of you to decelerate, push it down through the water into the bottom. *Did I see what I saw?* Her mind played it back. The distortion in the water could have been a null field around his body, or it could have been a gravity wave. *Deception, a decoy. He's not where I think!*

Eva's legs reacted instantly on the thought, pushing her away from the rock just as his energy blade flared and slashed down on it from behind. She spun, her own hands flaring ovals of indigo light, and parried a sweep from his foot. Coruscations flared where their energies met. She sprang backwards into the cloud of sediment his decoy had raised, and snapped off her blades. *I can deceive, too.*

Eva blinked away the searing afterimages on her retinas, turned at right angles and swam across the bottom to flank his position. Fear rose again but adrenaline and anger drove it down. *Dammit! I'm going to win this battle!*

But her determination wavered as she swam out of the sediment cloud and found him standing in front of her. If he had been stunned by impact with the water, or was running short of oxygen, he didn't show it. In fact -- she studied the flickering black nimbus around the emptiness of his null field -- *he's laughing! He's laughing at me!*

Teasingly, tiny energy blades grew from his hands, making figure eights in the water. More laughter, mocking.

Anger shook Eva and her hands reflexively flared energy blades, but then her training just as reflexively imposed the coolness of reason. *I can deceive, too.* She waved blades to mimic her enemy's, slicing bigger figure eights, the water hissing and vanishing into the planes of pure energy. *Just watch my hands.*

He did, crabbing sideways with lightning quickness, his blades elongating to match hers, but not engaging. He danced laterally across the bay bottom, studying her hand motions, hesitating.

Now Eva laughed at him. *Cautious. As well you should be. But it's too late now, sucker!*

The dolphin slammed into his back, driving him hard against the rock outcrop. Another one caught him from the side as he bounced off the rock; it knocked him onto the bay floor. A third hit him again, on a downward trajectory, driving him into the sand and muck.

Enough! Her mind screamed the command and the rest of the school broke off their attack and gathered around her, chittering. Eva Connard petted the alpha female on her nose and framed the intention for dismissal, for return to their own dolphin games. *Thank you, my friends. That was well done.*

Washington, DC | Sunday 2210 EST

The Capitol dome gleamed whitely under its lights. The Senator contemplated it through the window of his corner office in the Russell Senate Office Building for a few silent moments. Then he gestured toward the dome, and the flag flying off to its side.

“Power.”

He's getting right to it tonight, the younger man thought as he suppressed a nervous fidget. “I'm aware of that, Senator.”

“But not enough, son. It's not enough power for what's coming at us.”

“I'm aware of that, too, Senator.” *He'll start his pitch now, leading off with patriotism.*

The Senator glanced at him, then looked back out the window and spoke sonorously. “We need to control this new species, boy. Adopt them, make them our own. It's the only way America will be safe.”

“A way to make America safe, yes, Senator.”

“I hear a ‘but’ in there, boy.”

“Control is the issue. I don’t believe it’s possible.”

“You a little wet behind the ears, son. It’s always possible. Just need the right leverage.”

“Right. A judicious application of power. So you’ve said, Senator. And I’ve heard.”

“I worry about you, boy. Seems like you hear, but you don’t listen.”

The younger man placed his hands flat on the desk, spread them apart then turned the palms up expressively. His ring clicked against the desktop. “I truly don’t know what more I can do at this point, Senator.”

The older man’s gesture invited him to continue.

“Where’s our leverage? The world is quiet. The Mideast is peaceful for a change. Mainstream Islamics are sitting down hard on their radical idiot cousins. No other big conflicts in the world. The economy’s good, the market’s up. Nothing we can create an issue around. Nothing we can spin onto *Nova sapiens* and then come to their rescue, bring them into our camp. No opening wedge.”

The Senator tilted his chair back and inspected him thoughtfully.

Like a bug under a microscope, the younger man realized, but went on anyway.

“And, Senator, their own strategy is working beautifully. The young incipient *Novas* are flying completely below the radar. No publicity, no hint of what evolution is about to do to the human race. None.”

The Senator’s inspection continued, but he pressed on.

“And we can’t expose them. You said it yourself: too much downside risk. All our projections agree on the chaos that would cause.”

The Senator finally nodded. “They’d be up for grabs by anyone, if we disclose their existence. Yeah. Still...”

The younger man watched him consider that, and reject it yet again. *You should see what I see running across your face, Senator. Greed. Lust. I recognize them all too well.* The Senator blinked and rearranged his expression before he spoke.

“Access is the first step. Trust is the second.” The older man turned aside and contemplated the Capitol dome again. “I’m lookin’ for the third step here, boy,” he added softly, “the one that gives us control.”

“They make their own decisions at that enclave in Hawaii, Senator. Control isn’t possible.”

“Hmm. Direct control... maybe not, son. But you’re a lot smarter than that. I’ve seen you in action. You’re slick.”

“I’ve been working toward control, Senator.”

“Work on it harder, son.”

The Senator stared at him. The threat was unstated, but clear enough. And so was his unfortunate position. *I have to do whatever he wants. I know that. He knows it. He knows I know it. But he still toys with me. Ah, power.*

“You gonna do it, boy, for the good of the country, you gonna get control...” The Senator gave him a wide grin, crocodilian beneath empty eyes and coiffed silvery hair. “Whatever it is you have to. You gonna deliver those *Nova sapiens* kids to us, so we control their power.” He slammed his palm down hard on his desk and screamed.

“Or you gonna be fucked six ways from Sunday! So go figure it out, boy! And God bless America!”

Waimanu Bay, HI | Sunday 1711 HST

Her blood-oxygen nearly depleted, Eva Connard strode across the bay floor, grabbed the flickering darkness out of the muck and threw it ahead of her to the surface. She shot upward after it and out of the water, gasping in buckets of cool clean air, and stroked over to him as the null field decayed and his body became visible.

“Josh! You okay?”

Her big brother bobbed on the waves, paddling weakly and coughing out water. *Shit! Hope I didn’t crack another rib. He hates that.*

Joshua O’Donnell groaned and vomited.

Eva swam under him and added some buoyancy as he spasmed and vomited again. She held him lightly around the chest, feeling his pain and easing it. *No ribs broken. No lung perforations. Good.*

“Thanks, kiddo,” he gasped, “I needed that.”

“Hang on, Josh. Don’t be the tough guy. Let me finish.”

As they floated on the cool waves, Eva ran her hand over his back. *He took some serious hits; especially that last one. But... liver... kidneys... yeah, good. All good. He really is incredibly*

tough. The relief poured out of her. She wrapped a healing intention around it and let it flow from her hands into his body. His gasping eased. He sucked in seawater to rinse his mouth and spat it out. Then he turned and smiled, his turquoise eyes the same color as the sunlit water. She watched those eyes flicker brightly as they danced with a mix of pride and amusement.

“Nice improvisation, kiddo. Thought I had you there for a minute. Great ambush; I never saw it coming.”

“That’s three times, Josh... in a row. Can we quit now?”

“I know, Sis. And I’m proud of you. But all three were close. Too close. So we keep practicing. Sorry.”

“Live fire exercises are dangerous,” she objected. “Even with the safeguards of this place. With my mind locked into the gaming context I could hurt you beyond my healing capacity. Maybe even kill you.”

“Life’s dangerous, honey. Especially yours. Or it will be shortly. You said that yourself, remember?”

The waves rocked her gently, soothingly. *Yes I remember, Joshua.* She contemplated him. *And I know this pleasant time and place is just the calm before the storm. I’m grateful we have the luxury of preparing for it together, and for the love that makes you risk your life to prepare me.*

Her brother continued. “So every damn thing I can think up to throw at you, I will. Every Sunday.”

“You’re the deadliest creature on the planet, Josh. Who out there is going to throw something worse at me than you can?”

“Remember Lao Tsu, Eva...”

She smiled at him. “Those who have knowledge, don’t predict. Those who predict don’t have knowledge. That one?”

“Exactly. Especially around the edges of chaos.”

Edges of chaos. Yes, the attack will come out of nowhere, I think. Something we can’t prepare for no matter what. She sighed, splashed him, then popped out of the water to stand on its surface. *Still, he’s right; we have to prepare all we can.*

“Come on, let’s go have dinner,” she said, laughing. Eva Connard bent down, grabbed her big brother’s hand, and yanked him up to stand with her on the water’s surface. Together they ran

across the top of the waves then up the black sand beach toward the enclave buried in the Big Island's volcanic rock.

DRAFT